

From Bridgeton News
Radio station in signal war
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BRIDGETON -- "Who's going to listen to a broadcast of a Cumberland County Christian School women's basketball game?" asked Pastor Bill Luebkekmann of Hope Christian Church of Medford Lakes.

"Nobody goes to football games at Cherokee High School," he said, referring to a school district close to Luebkekmann's church in Burlington County.

Joseph Burke, operator of Lift 98.5 -- a local Christian radio station in Bridgeton, hopes somebody will listen.

Burke hopes somebody will care.

Covering CCC sports is only one way he's reached out to his extended listening base in Vineland.

Broadcasting the sermons of pastors in the city, including the Rev. Benjamin Ocasio Sr. of the Rock of Salvation Church, is another.

Burke may lose his Vineland listeners, however, should the Federal Communication Commission grant Luebkekmann or any other applicant permission to broadcast a regional radio station in Vineland on the same frequency as Lift 98.5.

Luebkekmann said it could be a while until the FCC takes any sort of action. However, he admitted he's expressed an interest in placing a radio translator in Vineland.

Radio translators are set up to re-transmit radio broadcasts that originate elsewhere -- in this case, Hope Christian Church's radio station in Medford Lakes, WVBV 90.5.

Burke said Vineland is not the only area where translators could be set up and cause interference with local radio broadcasts. He remarked that there are more than 60 sites in New Jersey that Luebkekmann is looking at.

Luebkekmann explained that WVMV 90.5 has a different philosophy of what is local than Lift 98.5.

"Local to us is more of a South Jersey feel. We're based out of Medford Lakes," he said. "We're not going to be as local as (Burke) is."

He said that programming is "some national and some regional." Something like a CCC sporting event, Luebkekmann added, would most likely not wind up on the station.

At the core of the radio turf war between Burke and Luebkekmann lies the fundamental question: What do people want to listen to? Local or regional programming?

"About 10 years ago, someone applied to build a McDonald's in the middle of downtown Medford on Main Street," Luebkekmann said.

He went on to explain that, although people protested its construction, it was built anyway. Now everybody eats there.

Although people may listen to Luebkekmann's station, Burke said it's going to isolate certain churches and pastors.

"The big problem is that (Luebkekmann's station) is going to be for Calvary Christian Church," he said. "It's not a station for all ministries. It's for Calvary."

Burke alleged that pastors of a Pentecostal denomination, like Ocasio, will not have their sermons broadcast on Luebkekmann's station.

The branch of the Calvary Christian Church in Vineland might have a better chance.

"Christian programming ... local Christian programming. We usually don't plan for the future," Luebkekmann replied when asked what sort of format his station would feature.

Luebkekmann doesn't see a problem with giving Burke a little competition and that he can understand his resistance.

He said it's not unlike a case where a developer wants to build something next to his home that he doesn't want there.

While he's able to go to the planning and zoning board and complain, in the end, he might not get what he wants.

"I can understand Joe wants to protect his turf," Luebkekmann said. "But the laws and rules entitle others to build. One day, the FCC will decide where this radio station can grow. Our nation is run by laws and rules."

Burke doesn't dispute that what Luebkekmann is doing is legal. He just wishes he'd take his business elsewhere.

"I wish (Calvary Christian Church) would say `Hey, we're in (Medford). We'll put up local translators in our area and do local programming there," he said. "I don't know why he wants to come here anyway."

Burke feels that low-power FM stations, created by the FCC in 2001 for local and non-profit organizations, are a much needed voice .

"They're really the life-blood for our communities," Burke concluded.

"What's left on the FM dial now is table scraps. The main course is here. The desserts are here," Luebkekmann responded. "(LPFM stations) are what the dogs get."

If that's the case, the dogfight may have just begun.

Lift 98.5 FM will broadcast women's basketball -- Cumberland County Christian School against Schalick High School -- tonight at 8 p.m.

